



Django Reinhardt is an elusive and eccentric jazz artist

## Gypsy Genius

BY LESLIE LIEBER

**The world's hottest guitarist is coming to America — if he doesn't meet some wandering "cousins" in the meantime**

**D**JANGO REINHARDT is a temperamental Gypsy whose deficiencies, which include illiteracy and two paralyzed fingers on his left hand, have not prevented him from becoming the most sophisticated hot-guitar player in the world.

The blazing enthusiasm for his artistry, which rises from jazz amateurs on both sides of the Atlantic, is wholeheartedly shared by Reinhardt himself. He will not play for less than 50,000 francs — \$1,000—a night, and since no one in Paris will meet his price he lives in poverty in a miserable Montmartre hotel.

This is not to say that he is a stranger to folding money; from time to time it finds its way to him. But then he has a hard time holding on to it for more than two days. He is flagrantly open-handed with Gypsies, and an inveterate gambler.

On one occasion, he returned from a North African tour with 500,000 francs, rushed to the Casino at Monte Carlo, lost every sou, and walked placidly home in a rainstorm to Cannes, about 40 miles away.

### Born in a Trailer

SUCH turns of fortune or the weather leave him unruffled. He likes the open air, and his concession to the European habit of living in houses and hotels is a recent one.

He was born in a *roulotte* — Gypsy trailer — on a side road in a small Belgian town near the French border, and lived in it until a year or so ago. When the Quintette of the Hot Club of France made its triumphant tour of Europe's capitals, its renowned guitarist traveled by Gypsy caravan.

In fact, outside of music, his life can be summed up in three words: *roulotte* and roulette.

Django is a Gypsy *avant tout*. His ambition is to be King of the Romanichels, which is not too farfetched considering that nearly every Gypsy in France knows him and most of them claim to be his cousin.

When he gives a concert or opens at a new night club, the precincts are always crowded hours in advance with scores of "cousins." Some swank clubs have threatened to fire him unless he shooed his monumental family away before the regular customers arrived.

### Respect, or Else

IN ANY controversy involving Gypsies, whether a matter of principle or his pocket-book, Reinhardt always sides with his kin-folk and will stalk out if they are not shown the amount of respect he feels they deserve.

Another one of his tricks runs this way: A group of unsavory, hungry, ill-kempt characters enters one of Paris' most distinguished restaurants and sits down at a table. Then Django, with his guitar under his arm, appears at the door.

He is an itinerant musician who desires to play for whatever the clientele cares to bestow. Such musicians being *à l'ordre du jour* in Paris, the request is always granted. Django settles down and begins to play magnificent tzigane music. After a few chords, the customers realize they are being serenaded by a genius, and when he passes the plate, the francs pour in.

Then comes the *coup de théâtre* that bowls over everyone from the boss to the bus boy. Taking off his hat, smoothing down his collar, and rubbing his hands in anticipation, Reinhardt joins his Gypsy friends and orders the best of food and drink for them.

At other times — if he's not in the mood,

or has been offended — it's almost impossible to get him to play. A few years ago, the Quintette joined such jazz stars as Duke Ellington and Benny Goodman in an international radio swing program.

In due time the American announcer said: "And now we take you to Paris, where you will hear Stephane Grappelly and his Quintette of the Hot Club of France." Reinhardt could not believe his ears; his name had not been mentioned. He got up, threw his guitar on a sofa and stalked out.

The Quintette, suddenly reduced by 20 per cent, struggled along while Charles Delaunay, secretary of the Hot Club, wheedled and cajoled the injured Django to return for the honor of French hot jazz.

Red with anger, Reinhardt finally returned and added his outraged artistry to the concert. For days after he refused to talk to anyone and, even now, he looks with disfavor on all radio script writers.

Django's first instruments were the violin and banjo. When the season brought the Gypsies to Paris, he used to play in the low Bal Musette dives in the Belleville section of town. At the age of 14 he made his first recordings as a banjoist in a corny, now-forgotten orchestra.

He heard his first jazz, a Louis Armstrong recording, in the Flea Market at Orléans and was converted to it immediately. He had a flair for improvisations and an oddly-assorted list of musicians — Eddy Duchin, Frankie Trumbauer, Ben Pollack and Eddie South, among them — helped to shape his style.

#### A New Start

JUST as he was about to enter big-time jazz with the English bandleader, Jack Hylton, his *roulotte* caught fire while he was asleep and he was severely burned. He spent the next 18 months in a hospital, emerging finally with two fingers of his left hand — the hand that frets the guitar and fingers the chords — completely paralyzed.

Django had to start all over again. He changed his whole system of fingering, eliminated certain chords, and compensated for this harmonic deficiency by developing a dizzy technique and creating new tone combinations. Today he has finally exercised the paralyzed fingers into a position enabling him to use the knuckles.

With this damaged equipment and a head full of exciting musical ideas, he has

fulfilled his early promise and can back most of the five-fingered virtuosi of the world right into the shadows.

But he is still a Gypsy and a citizen of the world. He can't explain either of his names. When the Nazis were in Paris, they cuddled up to him on the assumption that he was German. Django, who refused a Nazi offer to play in Berlin and Vienna at 70,000 francs a night, is not German.

#### Found: A Name

HE FIGURES, however, that an ancestor, like most Gypsies, found a change of name expedient while traversing Germany and came up with Reinhardt. "Django" is probably nothing more than an euphonious sound that pleased Django's mother.

Django himself speaks the French version of the Gypsy language with his 250-pound Gypsy wife. This is a sprightly compound of almost all European languages, with Hungarian predominating.

He knows no English, however, and has great contempt for the written word, particularly business contracts, which he signs with a cross.

He is equally contemptuous of playing dates. Scheduled to appear in Brussels, it is impossible to say whether he will turn up in Brussels, Copenhagen or Barcelona.

Knowing this weakness, a Geneva concert manager once engaged the Quintette with the proviso that no one would be paid unless all five showed

up. The evening of the performance found Django in Lyon; he had met some Gypsy cousins and decided to tag along with them.

M. Delaunay, whose accomplishments do not include playing the guitar, sat in with the Quintette, strumming silently to salvage the fee of France's hot five.

Django will soon put his cross on the business end of a contract that will bring him to America for a stipulated number of concerts. Somewhere along the line Django got the idea that all of America's 300,000 Gypsies will be at the pier to greet him and pay him homage.

And it is this misapprehension that has weaned him from his *roulotte* and roulette.

It is just possible, of course, that when the sailing date comes, Django will have run across another band of cousins and gone strumming into the Balkans.

If he makes it here, though, you'll hear some very nice guitar. *The End*



The children get a free serenade — clubs pay a high price